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Ground Troops to Kosovo: The Final Solution for the Kosovars

Pressure for sending NATO ground troops to invade Kosovo, including Americans, is continuing to arise. On Monday (May 17) Newsweek reported that the Joint Chiefs of Staff informed Secretary of Defense Cohen several weeks ago that "only ground troops would guarantee fulfillment of the administration's political objectives." Last week, joining Senators McCain, Biden and Liberman and Prime Minister Blair in urging the commitment of ground troops, an open letter to the president appearing as an ad in the New York Times (May 13, 1999) is signed by an impressive list of former officials, politicians and intellectuals ranging from Zbigniew Brzezinski, James Woolsey and Frank Carlucci to Geraldine Ferraro, Saul Bellow and Susan Sontag. Few outside the White House and State Department will disagree by now with their opening premise, that "bombing alone will not stop Slobodan Milosevic's campaign of murder, rape, plunder and forced deportation."

The letter-writers deserve credit for focussing attention, almost alone so far, on an objective which they describe as the first essential goal: "Saving the lives of the nearly one million Kosovars now facing death from starvation and murder within Kosovo." The question is whether a ground invasion of Kosovo, or of all Serbia, would serve that goal, or whether, as I believe, it would have a catastrophic effect on the very survival of the Albanian Kosovars remaining in Kosovo.

By all accounts, it would take from several weeks to months to deploy an invasion force for Kosovo to the region and prepare it to launch an attack. How would the prospect of an invasion affect the orders that Milosevic would give to Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces in Kosovo regarding the remaining Kosovars? How many of these would still be alive when the invasion was completed? How many Kosovar males of military age now in Kosovo would still be alive even when the invasion, weeks to months after major preparations for it were announced, actually began?

Proponents of a ground invasion, and for that matter even critics of it, do not seem to have addressed these questions. Both sides have treated the fate of Albanians remaining in Kosovo—still about half of the original population—as a kind of given, obviously unaffected by our bombing, beyond our influence unless, some think, we strive to protect them by invading on the ground. But this assumes that a NATO decision to invade would have no effect on Milosevic's decision to kill rather than to expel more of these people, nor on the rate and scale of the killing, as if he were already killing as many as his forces were physically capable of doing. That cannot be the case.

We don't know how many male Kosovars of military age—broadly from 15 to 60—have been killed already, quite possibly tens of thousands or even, as Secretary Cohen suggested on Sunday the 100,000 now unaccounted for, rather than the 4600 victims that NATO has conservatively estimated. But even the highest estimate would mean that most of them are still alive, and thousands have been expelled and are continuing to arrive as refugees outside Kosovo. Would that continue if an invasion were clearly on the way? Would Milosevic allow any more to leave, to be recruited by the KLA? Would he allow them to live, to support the invasion? Or would he close the borders to them and eliminate them? Within weeks, despite air attacks, the Serbs could slaughter 100-200,000 Albanian males. (In Rwanda five years ago, an average of 8000 civilians a day were killed for 100 days, mostly with machetes.)

Obviously, Milosevic and his subordinates are brutal enough to do that. If they haven't done it already (and no evidence has appeared that they have, on anything like that potential scale) it may well be because they fear that credible evidence of it would make an invasion inevitable. A commitment to ground invasion prior to such evidence would remove that deterrent; just as the US commitment in

March to begin bombing in support of an ultimatum and the consequent withdrawal of international monitors removed an implicit deterrent against massive ethnic cleansing and expulsion in Kosovo, with consequences that were unforeseen by the White House though not by some others. Whatever might have been done earlier, to launch the fullscale preparations for invasion now would give Milosevic an urgent, practical incentive to carry out a focussed slaughter of Albanian males in Kosovo in the weeks before the invasion could be launched.

As for the remaining civilians—women, children and old people—they could be used against the invasion itself as human shields by the hundreds of thousands, in a way never before seen in warfare. Fighting in built-up areas, NATO troops would probably be fired on from strongpoints in buildings that were packed on every floor with Kosovar women and children. Unless NATO eschewed, at considerable cost in effectiveness and NATO casualties, the use of artillery and bombs, or mortars, satchel charges and rockets to destroy those buildings, the straightforward, traditional approach to taking objectives and eliminating resistance in city fighting would make NATO the executioners of hundreds of thousands of the people we were fighting to protect.

I believe these grounds alone (quite apart from NATO casualties—which, however sizeable, might be a hundred times less than Kosovar deaths—or diplomatic reactions and long-term prospects) are enough to rule out ground invasion as an option, and even serious preparations for it, which some have urged as a threat. The threat alone, sufficiently credible, would have a high chance of triggering the extermination of remaining male Kosovars in Kosovo. Carrying out the threat would eliminate most of the women and children.

The heading on the recent open letter to the president is: "Only Ground Troops Will End Ethnic Cleansing in Kosovo." With ghastly irony, the proposition may be correct; deploying and launching an invasion force probably would end ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, by ending the lives of most remaining Kosovars in Kosovo. It would convert a campaign of atrocities and mass expulsions into unequivocal genocide, the annihilation of most of the million Kosovars still hostages to Milosevic.

Distasteful as it is to bargain with Milosevic, there is only one way to stop the present ethnic cleansing and atrocities, and to permit refugees to return safely. That is to negotiate as quickly as possible an agreed-upon, unopposed introduction of large, well-armed international security forces into Kosovo capable of protecting the Albanians there as long as needed. To achieve such an agreement will require significant concessions on both sides from their presently declared positions. Non-NATO parts of the protective force, including Russian troops, would probably have to predominate in the northern parts of Kosovo, where Serbians (not only Milosevic) will be most concerned to maintain effective sovereignty, which realistically they will lose in the other areas of Kosovo where NATO forces predominate. Such a result will satisfy no one, except by comparison to every practical alternative. Nothing better will be achieved by bombing indefinitely—we bombed Vietnam for seven and a half years in pursuit of goals we refused to compromise and never achieved—or by moving in frustration toward ground invasion and a fate for Kosovar civilians more like Cambodia than Vietnam.